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## Image Politics. Ordinary Fascism – Contexts of Production and Reception

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## Image Politics

### Ordinary Fascism – Contexts of Production and Reception

Sabine Hänsgen, Wolfgang Beilenhoff

#### Abstract

*Obyknovennyyi fashizm / Ordinary Fascism* (1965) is a Soviet film compiled from Nazi era film materials by Mikhail Romm together with Iurii Khaniutin and Maia Turovskaia. It was the first comprehensive attempt at a cinematic reflection on fascism and, implicitly, a post-Stalinist study of Soviet totalitarianism. As a key film of the 1960s it triggered a broad international debate that offers an insight into the discursive field of the political and ideological mirroring at the height of the Cold War period. *Obyknovennyyi fashizm* is part of the “compilation film” genre, which, simultaneously, both re-releases and reinterprets historic imagery. It was assembled from two million meters of footage from Nazi newsreels, documentaries and Kulturfilms, confiscated from the inventory of the Reich Film archive by the Red Army and transported to Moscow in 1945. This footage was complemented by photographs, for example portraits taken by Hitler’s personal photographer Heinrich Hoffmann or private snapshots of soldiers of the German Wehrmacht that proved controversial in the first Wehrmacht Exhibition in the 1990s. This article deals with the film’s protracted production history as well as its controversial reception both in the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic. The analysis puts particular emphasis on the media strategies the film employs to achieve a critical reading of the Nazi footage, focusing on the interplay between visual montage and voice-over commentary as well as the use of other media forms (photography and writing). In the final part of the article Romm’s film is examined in the context of other movies about National Socialism and the Holocaust, discussing earlier works including Alain Resnais’ *Nuit et brouillard / Night and Fog* (1955, France), Erwin Leiser’s *Den blodiga tiden / Mein Kampf* (1960, Sweden, Germany), and DEFA films and Polish documentaries as well as later examples such as the contemporary film collage *Hitlers Hitparade / Hitler’s Hit Parade* (Oliver Axer and Susanne Benze, 2003, Germany).

#### Keywords

Mikhail Romm; Iurii Khaniutin; Maia Turovskaia; Soviet Union; Federal Republic of Germany; German Democratic Republic; compilation film; documentary film; montage of attractions; voice-over commentary; Cinema and Third Reich; Cinema and Cold War

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## Compilation Film as Genre

On the basis of images produced during the National Socialist era Mikhail Romm, together with Iuri Khaniutin and Maiia Turovskaia, created the film *Obyknovennyi fashizm / Ordinary Fascism*. This Soviet documentary project, released in 1965, was the first comprehensive attempt at cinematic reflection on fascism and implicitly a post-Stalinist study of Soviet totalitarianism. *Obyknovennyi fashizm* belongs to the genre of compilation film, which Jay Leyda wrote about in his book *Films Beget Films* (1964). Leyda defines this genre as one providing a re-release of historical visual material.

In this process, the rediscovered material is transposed into a new context on the editing table. Ideally, this brings an alienating view of the old material as Leyda puts it:

Any means by which the spectator is compelled to look at familiar shots as if he had not seen them before, or by which the spectator's mind is made more alert to the broader meanings of old materials – this is the aim of the correct compilation (1964: 45).

Compilation as a documentary form differentiates itself from other filmic methods such as collage or appropriation which also use found footage by assigning distinct historical references to its archive images (William C. Wees 1992: 36-52).<sup>1</sup> The archived representations of history conflict with the new meanings created by compilation.

In the Soviet context, it was Esfir' Shub who first developed the possibility of writing history through the means of cinematic compilation. On March 11, 1927, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the February Revolution, *Padenie dinastii Romanovykh / The Fall Of The Romanov Dynasty* (Shub, USSR) debuted. This was assembled from Russian and foreign newsreels from 1913 to 1917, and the personal archive of the last Russian tsar Nikolai II. Shub's attention centred on the film image as a document:

I strived not to use editing to make the chronicling material abstract, but to add to its documentary nature. Everything was at the service of the subject matter. Despite the limited range of the historical events and facts that were covered, this allowed me to structure the material so faithfully that it revived the years before the revolution and the days of February (Shub 1959: 248).

The "second hand" material that Shub used, forced her to take a particular position (Mikhail Yampolsky 1991) and from that to work against the material's original orientation, and thus create a piece of revolutionary agitation.

Following the failure of the revolutionary utopia and the experiences of totalitarianism, Romm produced the compilation film *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, using footage selected from two million meters of Nazi newsreels, documentaries and kulturfilms that had been confiscated by the Red Army from the inventory of the Reich Film Archives (Reichsfilmarchiv) and transported to Moscow in 1945.<sup>2</sup> This was complemented by photographs, for example the portrait photos by Hitler's personal photographer Heinrich Hoffmann, which were stored in leather bags at the Mosfilm Studios, or private snapshots of soldiers of the German Wehrmacht that proved the first Wehrmacht Exhibition several decades later (Dieter Reifarth and Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff 1995: 475-503; Hannes Heer 2002: 869-898). Some of these photographs were shown in *Obyknovennyi fashizm* for the first time while others were already part of the collective memory. Added to that were film and photo materials from archives and libraries of the Soviet Union, Poland, and the GDR, and Eastern European legal authorities.<sup>3</sup> Added to this were children's drawings, films from the Warsaw Ghetto, supplementary footage from the museum at Auschwitz and – in the style of "cinema vérité" prevalent at that time – shots of contemporary everyday life filmed in kindergartens, university departments and on the streets, establishing a connection to the present day.

1. Wees distinguishes "compilation" with its reference to historical reality from "collage", which aims primarily at a deconstruction of traditional modes of representation in avant-garde and experimental films, as well as from "appropriation", which defers to the realm of postmodernism and simulation.

2. On the further particulars of the transportation of the Reich Film Archive to Moscow see Iossif Manewitsch (2009).

3. The opening credits of the original version featured an exact listing of the archives whose documents were used for *Obyknovennyi fashizm*: "This film uses captured documentary material from the film archive of the ministry of propaganda of fascist Germany and the personal photo archive of Hitler, as well as numerous amateur photographs by SS soldiers. Documentary material was provided for the film by: Gosfilmofond of the USSR; the USSR Central State Archive of Film and Photo Documents; USSR State Committee of

Security at the Council of Ministers; USSR Central Archive Administration at the Council of Ministers; USSR Central State Archive of the October Revolution; State archives of the Belarusian and Latvian Socialist Soviet Republics, State Film Archive of the German Democratic Republic, Central Party Archive of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany, GDR Museum of German History, GDR Institute of Contemporary History, State museums at Buchenwald, Sachsenhausen, Auschwitz and Majdanek, Central Commission for the Prosecution of Hitler Crimes in the People's Republic of Poland, Institute of Party History at the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, Archive of the Warsaw Documentary Film Studio."

## Revisiting the Totalitarian Past



Fig. 1: Lurii Khaniutin and Maiia Turovskaia. Image courtesy of Mosfil'm.

Turovskaia and Khaniutin remember the history of the production of *Obyknovennyi fashizm*:

Everything started out pretty much by accident. One of us was working on a book about German cinema, the other about Soviet films on the Great Patriotic War. Both of us travelled to the State Film Archive of the USSR in Belye Stolby to view material (Turovskaia and Khaniutin. 2006: 29).<sup>4</sup>

After extensively studying the Reich Film Archive the two young film historians and critics composed a first script draft:

In that preliminary script we attempted to concentrate on the origin of Nazism into three days and three nights of a German 'everyman'.

First Day – Day of war and national defeat. Documentary footage of a poison gas attack merges with the famous scene from Dovzhenko's "Arsenal": a German soldier convulsed in his death throes from laughing gas. And then the contorted and deformed world of expressionistic graphics as though seen with the eyes of the crazed soldier. The engraving is replaced by a similarly still frame from "The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari", the well-known film from the early 20s.

The fantastic figure of the mysterious somnambulist Cesare on a strange, broken path with painted shadows...

The frame comes to life, a figure runs along a path...

Strange nightmares surround yesterday's soldier.

Doctor Caligari in his fairground showbooth shows the audience the somnambulist Cesare. A youth asks: "How long will I live?" The somnambulist replies: "Until the evening."

A title in a gothic script: "Mord" (Murder).

Tyranny, violence, murder... The night of defeat... (Ibid.: 35).

The script outlined the intention of intercutting documentary footage with excerpts from German feature films in order to include, following Siegfried Kracauer's 1947 *From Caligari to Hitler* the dimension of the collective unconscious, the inner dispositions of the average citizen, into a cinematic reflection on fascism:

Consequently, while watching countless "Wochenschau", weekly news reviews, we, that is, the already large film crew, calmly set aside the chronicles of all types of historical events – sometimes even of decisive significance –



and patiently and meticulously sought everything which could serve our main goal of a psychological portrait of fascism, in other words “ordinary fascism”, or, how to correctly translate the title in German, *Der alltägliche Faschismus*, everyday fascism (Ibid.: 32).

The chosen title for the film project *Obyknovennyi fashizm* was supplemented in the script by sub-headings that clarify the connection between fact and fiction.

Therefore, placing at its head a serious and many times thought-through but disputed title which nonetheless seemed to us all a complete platitude, hypocritically joking and bantering with each other, we wrote the “box office” titles of its parts:

I. LIVERY

II. VAMPIRES AND FUHRERS

III. FROM TORCHES TO OVENS (Ibid.) 5

The authors did not, as one might expect, present their script to the Central Documentary Film Studio, but turned directly to the well-known feature film director Romm, hoping to win his support for their project. Romm agreed to collaborate but refused to incorporate any fictional material into the film and insisted on using only documentary footage: “Facial expressions, make-up, set decoration – everything exposed a dishonest and old-fashioned art whose drama seemed ridiculous. I could no longer take that seriously” (Romm 2006: 13).

Apparently, Romm at that point in his career wanted to break with the theatrical forms of staging that had helped to shape the aesthetics of personality cults in the Soviet Union – an aesthetic in whose development he himself had played an important part with his feature films *Lenin v oktiabre / Lenin in October* (1937) and *Lenin v 1918 godu / Lenin in 1918* (1939). These films, which had been awarded the Stalin Prize, were not only at the centre of Soviet cult aesthetics but also, as their popularity demonstrates, were part of Soviet mass-media folklore. By staging the Lenin myth in his films, Romm at the same time also helped to establish the Stalin myth in Soviet cinema that, deliberately ignoring historical facts, presented Stalin as Lenin’s legitimate successor and credited him with the leading role in the Soviet Union’s revolutionary and post-revolutionary history (Oksana Bulgakowa 1994: 65-69).

In his secret address during the 20<sup>th</sup> convention of the CPSU in February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev turned against this personality cult. This speech marked a starting point of the process of de-Stalinisation in the Soviet Union, a movement of social renewal that has come to be known as the Thaw, derived from the title of Ilia Ehrenburg’s novel *Ottepel’ / Thaw* (1954-56).<sup>6</sup> During this period, Stalin became the most prominent victim of politicised image effacement, similar to which that he himself had practised excessively by erasing his political adversaries, especially Lev Trotskii, from all images. After his death, all depictions of Stalin in turn vanished from the public sphere.

In the course of the political confrontation with Soviet history during the Thaw, Romm also removed the very same character that he himself had established as a cult figure from his movies. At first, in 1955, following an iconoclastic impulse, he revised his Lenin diptych by simply cutting out all scenes in which Stalin appears. In his book *Conversations about Cinema*, Romm explains that he would have preferred to simply discard the 630 metres of the cult of personality he had produced. It was only on the initiative of a studio employee that the deleted scenes were delivered to the State film archive for preservation (Romm 1964: 302). After the first defensive reaction of refusing to see his own images which had helped give rise to the personality cult, Romm turned to more technically accomplished procedures of effacement. He adapted the photographic technique of retouching for the cinematic medium and employed film tricks to make Stalin disappear behind superimposed extras, lampshades or simply in the empty space of the image.<sup>7</sup>

However, cutting out or retouching personality cult footage proved to be an inadequate method of coming to terms with Stalinist aesthetics. Romm himself sensed that he was in a creative crisis. He was looking for a means to renew his aesthetic and free himself from the “old” Soviet conventions of representation that had shaped his own feature films so decisively.<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, *Obyknovennyi fashizm* can also be seen as a response to Romm’s earlier film *Chelovek No. 217 / Girl No. 217* from 1944 which had drawn the stereotype image of a sadistic, brutal German enemy during WW II. Later, in the Cold War period, Romm reacted to the new political situation and transferred this image of the enemy to a “fictional” America in his spy films *Russkii vopros / The Russian Question* (1947) and *Sekretnaia missiia / Secret Mission* (1950). This development found its final point in the aesthetically obsolete *Ubiistvo na ulice Dante / Murder on Dante Street* (1956), reproducing old stereotypes at a time when Neorealism had already established itself in the Soviet Union. It is set in Nazi occupied France and, following in the footsteps of such films as *Pyshka / Boule de suif* (1934), *Mechta / Dream* (1943) or *Chelovek No. 217* (1944), deals with the psychology of the petty bourgeois in the capitalist world.

Romm could not immediately overcome his creative crisis with a new film project. However, he was able to make his personal experience a subject of public debate. Earlier than the majority of the intellectual elite, Romm talked about the Stalin era’s political perversions of culture (Romm 2003). He pointed out how much misfortune this time

had brought not only to “those that it prevented from making films” but also to “the privileged few that were allowed to make films” (Romm: 304). He publicly talked about something that was a taboo at the time. In his speech at the All-Russian Theatrical Society in 1962 Romm, who was of Jewish origin, faced the fact of Soviet anti-Semitism that was concealed behind the late Stalinist campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans.”<sup>9</sup> Romm’s role as an intellectual ultimately found its expression in his work as a teacher at the State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK). Among his students were the most outstanding directors of the new generation, including Andrei Tarkovskii, Grigorii Chukhrai, Andrei Mikhalkov-Konchalovskii and Vasili Shukshin. It was not until his *Deviat’ dnei odnogo goda / Nine Days of One Year* (1961), in which he discussed the contemporary problem of nuclear physics, that Romm was finally able to redefine himself as a director as well. Moving towards Neorealism, philosophical debates between scientists about technological progress and ethical responsibility took the place of action. In the light of this reorientation, Romm accepted the young scriptwriters Turovskaia and Khaniutin’s proposal. He considered documentary an opportunity to develop an analytical perspective on history. *Obyknovennyi fashizm* is not only a compilation film about National Socialism but also Romm’s way of coming to terms with his own past as a Stalin era director, a kind of “cinematic repentance.”

4. For the interview with Turovskaia as a part of *Obyknovennyi fashizm*’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary see <http://www.svoboda.mobi/a/27134597.html>
5. A German translation of the literary script by Turovskaia, Khaniutin, and Romm as well as texts on the production history appeared in Romm, Chanjutin and Turowskaja (1981).
6. For a broader account of the Soviet Thaw see Reinhard Crusius and Manfred Wilke (1977).
7. On the photographic method of retouching and its use in the Stalinist Soviet Union see David King (1997). For cinematic examples of how these changes were affected, see the end of Olga Bulgakowa’s documentary *Stalin - Eine Mosfilm Produktion*
8. On the development of Romm’s oeuvre see Turovskaia (2006a).
9. See Anonymous (1995) and Olga Gershenson (2013), in particular the chapter “The Holocaust on the Thawing Screens. From *The Fate of a Man* (1959) to *Obyknovennyi fashizm* (1965), 57-70.

## Film Chapters of *Obyknovennyi fashizm*

To capture the different dimensions of fascism, *Obyknovennyi fashizm* presents a much wider range of Nazi images than had been seen before. The film is divided into sixteen chapters, introduced by intertitles presenting their respective thematic foci. Mass meetings, parades and rallies are contrasted with images of the Holocaust, political resistance and warfare. Special emphasis is put on Hitler’s Führer cult, the culture of the Third Reich and its race theory. Finally, we see neo-fascist activities in Western countries in the middle of the 1960s, American Marines, missile systems and nuclear explosions.



Fig. 2: At the cutting table: Mikhail Romm and Valentina Kulagina. Image courtesy of Mosfil'm.

The chapters are arranged in a kind of “montage of attractions” that Romm, following Eizenshtein, designates as a

contrasting confrontation of surprising, shocking, affect-laden moments (Romm 1975: 272). Therefore, the defining criterion for choosing images was their attraction value. The point was to examine the enormous corpus of two million metres of footage from a present perspective to determine which topics, shots or motifs were able to speak to the viewer with the greatest emotional intensity. Romm searched for ways to transfer feature film methods to documentaries: "I was convinced that considerably more emotion could be extracted from documents by dealing with them as a director treats the shots of a feature film" (Ibid.: 279).

For that reason, Romm did not follow the traditional chronological, historiographic method of the compilation film genre. It was not his intention to give an illustrated history lesson but to analyse fascism in its psychological dimension. To this end, the extensive and diverse material was sorted according to different topics:

One-hundred and twenty topics were chosen. This is the way we sorted the material: close-ups of people yelling "Sieg Heil," close-ups of silent people, close-ups of thoughtful people. Hitler speeches, running masses, screaming masses, corpses, everyday events of the war, concentration camps, parades, rallies, stadium, Hitler Youth, wounded – in short – 120 topics. The material for each of these topics came from roughly 20 to 30 sources, and an immense "massif" was accumulated (Ibid.: 274).

This massif of material became accessible for analysis because the images that were selected and thereby isolated from their original contexts were integrated into new discourse. As well as the editing, the intertitles that subdivide the film add to the effect. The credits are immediately followed by the intertitle: "Chapter One." Over the course of the film, this chapter structure unfolds in different ways: for example, there are headings such as "At the same time..." (Chapter IV) that are reminiscent of silent films; self-reflexive headings like "About myself" (Chapter VI); Nazi slogans "One people, one Reich, one Führer" (Chapter VII), or historiographic headings such as "The end of the Third Empire" (Chapter XV). As an open ending, a "Final, unfinished chapter" takes a look at contemporary political developments and challenges us to contemplate not only a renaissance of fascism in the mid 1960s, when the film was made, but also in our own present day as later viewers.

Employing written text as a meta-medium offers the possibility of interfering with the images, of structuring and commenting upon them. At the same time, a parallel between the organisation of the film and the structure of a book is suggested. For that reason, the text is not white on a black background – as it is common in silent films – but black on a white background, as a cinematic book-script akin to the book medium.

The film alternates between text and image. Every intertitle transforms viewers into readers and puts them at a reflective distance to the affect-laden images. But on the other hand, every image which succeeds an intertitle becomes even more powerful since it ruptures the abstracting process of reading. In this tension between text and image, between chapter heading and film sequence, cognitive and affective dispositions of the viewer are correlated – this is a new discursive register of the compilation film.

However, *Obyknovennyyi fashizm* not only references writing and books in general but, in chapter II, presents a kind of exposition of a specific book: Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, labelled the "bible of German fascism" by the film's voice-over commentary. This chapter, "Mein Kampf or How to Treat Calf Skins" consists of footage from a kulturfilm titled *Das Buch der Deutschen / The Book Of The Germans* (Richard Skowronnek jr., 1936, Germany).<sup>10</sup> Romm was one of the few filmmakers at the time who included kulturfilms as an integral part of the National Socialist media complex into their work. For him, the kulturfilm accomplished the very hybridisation of documentary and feature film that he himself strived for programmatically.<sup>11</sup>

*Das Buch der Deutschen* was shown as a supporting film at the world premiere of the feature *Der Kaiser von Kalifornien / The Emperor of California* (Luis Trenker, 1936, Germany) on July 21, 1936. It constructs a panoramic view of German history and culminates in the staging of *Mein Kampf*. The Nazi Party newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* commented:

This kulturtonfilm [...] offers a gripping look at the cultural values created by German craftsmanship. [...] The presentation of the technical development of the book effectively frames the images from the most recent past and present times, symbolically transforming the spiritual meaning of this book into the cinematic realm (quoted in Ulrich von der Osten 1998: 168).

In the sequence quoted by Romm, a copy of *Mein Kampf*, written on parchment and stored in a shrine, is presented as a cult object. Romm turns against such a fetishisation of the ideological scripture, against this aura of the sacred that surrounds the book, by using film as a medium to submit Hitler's book to a critical, audio-visual reading.

Central here is Romm's cinematic exploration of Hitler's understanding of the masses. Chapter XII is dedicated to the mass phenomenon. Its heading "The Masses Have to be Treated like a Woman"<sup>12</sup> is one of Hitler's many phrases that pervade the film and reference a "theory of the masses" inherent to *Mein Kampf*. Similar to Gustave Le Bon, Hitler regarded the masses as guided primarily by emotion, dominated by the unconscious mind, characterised by regression and loss of the conscious personality. *Obyknovennyyi fashizm* shows the role assigned to the figure of the leader or "Führer" as a guiding authority.

We see masses cheering Hitler enthusiastically as he drives past them in an open car; we see Hitler giving speeches in front of vast crowds and ceremonial torchlight processions. Mass demonstrations are shown, male as military formations, female as dance formations of showgirls. With these images, Romm not only aims at the historical context of the Third Reich; they also imply a critique of similar Soviet mass events in which, regardless of their differing political orientation, similar visualisations of the relationship between leader and masses can be observed.<sup>13</sup>

Romm's film images, however, are not simply an exploration of the political staging of the masses. They also consistently deal with the subject of mass culture as such that for Romm is characterised by enforced conformity, consumption and a loss of individuality – as both *Obyknovennyy fashizm* and the subsequent film project *I vse-taki ia veriu / And Still I Believe... on which* he worked from 1968 to 1971 (but which premiered posthumously) demonstrate.

This is why at the beginning and the end of *Obyknovennyy fashizm*, Romm focuses on individual persons, especially children and young people, as a counterpoint. They are not called by name but simply introduced as representatives of human creativity in general. They place the film in the present and are representatives of a humanistic discourse. Their movements echoing each other in a series, each of these faces is "[...] face of man in general and only then the face of a specific person" (Aumont 2004: 23). As bearers of the generically human as well as the individual, these faces immediately address the viewer, trigger processes of empathy.<sup>14</sup> With this emphasis on the single person and man as an individual, Romm excoriates the monumental heroism that characterised the aesthetics of both fascist Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup>

10. [http://www.filmportal.de/film/das-buch-der-deutschen\\_7d90e2691eaa4ed99587f9698c763927](http://www.filmportal.de/film/das-buch-der-deutschen_7d90e2691eaa4ed99587f9698c763927)

11. See newer research on the genre kulturfilm in Ramón Reichert (2006). Furthermore, on the significance of kulturfilm in the Nazi media system see Eric Rentschler (1996).

12. cf.: "Like the woman whose spiritual sensation is determined less by abstract reason than by an indefinable, emotional desire for complementary power and who would therefore rather bow to the strong than rule the weakling, the masses also love the ruler more than the pleader [...]" ("Gleich dem Weibe, dessen seelisches Empfinden weniger durch Gründe abstrakter Vernunft bestimmt wird als durch solche einer undefinierbaren, gefühlsmäßigen Sehnsucht nach ergänzender Kraft, und das sich deshalb lieber dem Starken beugt, als den Schwächling beherrscht, liebt auch die Masse mehr den Herrscher als den Bittenden [...]" ) Hitler (1939: 44). Also, "The overwhelming majority of people have such a feminine disposition and attitude that their thoughts and actions are ruled less by sober deliberation than rather by emotional sensation." ("Das Volk ist in seiner überwiegenden Mehrheit so feminin veranlagt und eingestellt, dass weniger nüchterne Überlegung als vielmehr gefühlsmäßige Empfindung sein Denken und Handeln bestimmt.") (Ibid.: 201).

13. For a comparative perspective cf. Martin Loiperdinger, Rudolf Herz, and Ulrich Pohlmann (1995).

14. Romm's pathos of humanitarianism echoes the exhibition *The Family of Man* by Edward Steichen. His vote for "man in general" was criticised as mythology by Roland Barthes (1964).

15. Chapter IX of *Obyknovennyy fashizm*, which is titled "The Arts", draws on kulturfilm footage not only to show Hitler during a visit to an art exhibition but also uses shots from Josef Thorak's studio (probably from *Josef Thorak, Werkstatt und Werk / Josef Thorak, Workshop and Work* (Hans Cürli and Arnold Frank, 1943, Germany).

## Media Intervention: Photography and Voice

A crucial strategy of *Obyknovennyy fashizm's* intervention into Nazi discourse is the insertion of different media into film – namely photography and the voice. What we are dealing with here is an intervention that turns the multimedia dimension innate to all films into an instrument of critical reflection.

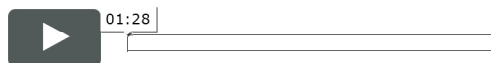
In *Obyknovennyy fashizm*, photography undergoes a transformation leading to an additional charge:

We could see for ourselves that photography gains a unique expressiveness on the screen, becomes cinematic, like a film still. At times, it is even more expressive than any shot could ever be. The isolation and frozenness of the moment gives it a special power, stimulates thought and inspires imagination (Romm 2006: 19).

A key method of critiquing of the cult of the leader is contrasting footage of Hitler's speeches with a series of excessively exaggerated poses shot by his personal photographer Hoffmann. By means of an analytic dissection of the cinematic sequence into a succession of photographic stills, the collective experience loses its spellbinding power whereas the pathos develops comical features.

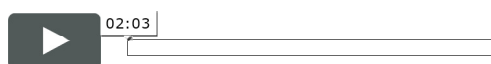
Other photo-sequences deal with the special materiality of photography as a medium. This is why the so-called Stroop album is presented not only as a document of the deportation of the Warsaw Jews, but also as a photo album, contributing to the auratisation of the photographs it contains.<sup>16</sup> Together with the audience, the

camera goes through the pages of the album, lets its gaze wander across the photos, magnifies details, and presents individual pieces of evidence. In his memoirs, Romm discusses the sources of these photographs to establish their authenticity as historical witnesses of truth. At the same time, he emphasises the material dimension of the Stroop album that was made as a present for Himmler: “A solid, heavy album, bound in leather. Superbly photographed images. The text on special paper” (Ibid.: 20).



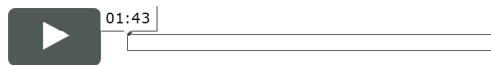
**Video 1:** Clip from: Mikhail Romm, *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, 1965, Stroop album sequence, USSR version. Clip courtesy of Mosfil'm.

In contrast, another sequence consists of amateur photographs found in the possession of soldiers of the German Wehrmacht alongside photographs of their wives and children. These images show the perpetrators posing next to their horribly mutilated victims. The disturbing quality of these photographs is not only explained by the fact that ordinary people captured such scenes as souvenirs. What is even more shocking is that these criminal photos were kept next to intimate photos of family life.<sup>17</sup> The audience is thus confronted with the “banality of evil” (Hannah Arendt 1963).



**Video 2:** Clip from: Mikhail Romm, *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, 1965, Wehrmacht photographs sequence, USSR version. Clip courtesy of Mosfil'm.

Romm's discovery at the museum of Auschwitz reveals the essential quality of the photographic medium in a very personal dimension. Romm remembers walking down the corridor of a barrack on the last day of shooting, approaching the small registration photographs of the concentration camp prisoners and being struck by the gaze of their eyes: “Above and below, right and left, everywhere were those small photos and eyes. The faces looked different, and yet there was something in those eyes all had in common. Death was in those eyes” (ibid.: 19).



**Video 3:** Clip from: Mikhail Romm, *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, 1965, the eye-sequence, USSR version. Clip courtesy of Mosfil'm.



**Fig. 3:** Shooting *Obyknovennyi fashizm* in Auschwitz. Image courtesy of Mosfil'm.

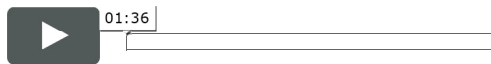
In *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, the intervention into Nazi images operates not only with the difference between photography and film but equally between image and voice. As mentioned before, the film was initially assembled as silent film by means of the “montage of attractions”. The idea was to assemble the images as images, as purely visually correlated sequences, prior to any verbal contextualisation. Only at the second stage would an additional semantic horizon be established by means of the voice-over.

There was a lengthy debate on how and by whom the commentary should be spoken. Among those discussed were the official radio announcer Iurii Levitan, the contemporary actor Innokentii Smoktunovskii and the East German actor and singer Ernst Busch. However, these options were quickly rejected. We do not hear the “voice of God” that is typical of traditional compilation films and authoritatively directs and assigns meaning to the images from off-screen. Neither do we hear a synch sound voice that would create the effect of immediacy and authenticity in the style of “cinéma vérité” (Bill Nichols 1976: 258-273). Instead, we hear a voice that defies conventional registers and, contrary to the norm, it is the voice of the author himself, Romm.

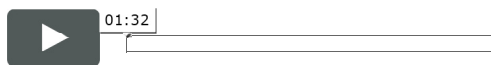
It is a conversational, questioning, ironic, at times declamatory voice that occasionally lapses into silence. It always seeks to connect with the viewer and presents itself as a voice of dissent. Again and again, the film confronts us with Hitler's voice in its suggestive status, as a “voice that is not ‘naked’ but impregnated by [...] the affirmative resonance of a mass audience” (Cornelia Epping-Jäger 2003: 115). Romm's voice assumes the opposite position. The recording makes it a voice without reverberation, without spatial resonance (Michel Chion 1999: 50-51). As a result, it finds its resonance in the images themselves – and the text it speaks results from a continuous process of talking about these images.

This voice of dissent is characterised not only by its intimate proximity to the viewer but also by its ability to verbally take possession of its opponent. The beginning of chapter VIII is exemplary of this process. We see Hitler in a variety of contexts and, at the same time, hear Romm's voice invade him by suddenly saying I instead of HE, no longer speaking of Hitler as HE but saying ME: “Me and the squirrel.” This pronominal transfer from the expected HE to the paradoxical I creates the ambivalence between analytical distance and personal involvement that is the prerequisite for any ironic usurpation of Hitler by the author and narrator Romm.

The implications of this leap from HE to I become apparent when looking at the dubbed versions of Romm's film. In both the East German and West German versions, Romm's voice was replaced by an actor's: Martin Flörchinger, Brechtian actor at the Berlin Ensemble, in the East German version, and Martin Held, film actor and member of the National Drama Theatres Berlin/West, in the West German version. In contrast to the former, the shift from HE to I was reproduced less consistently in the latter. As a result, the original "Me – the mountains in the background", "Me – the sea in the background" or "Me and the squirrel" was, in the tradition of the authorial commentary that keeps its distance, replaced by "He and the mountain scenery", "He and the seascape" or "He and the squirrel" and so forth.

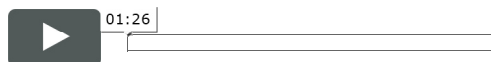


**Video 4:** Clip from: Mikhail Romm, *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, 1965, beginning of Chapter VIII, USSR version. Clip courtesy of Mosfil'm.



**Video 5:** Clip from: Mikhail Romm, *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, 1965, beginning of Chapter VIII, GDR version. Clip courtesy of. Mosfil'm / DEFA.





**Video 6:** Clip from: Mikhail Romm, *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, 1965, beginning of Chapter VIII, FRG version. Clip courtesy of Mosfil'm / Atlas Film.

The importance of this voice of dissent is demonstrated by a comprehensive appropriation of Hitler's discourse. Romm usurps passages from *Mein Kampf*, Hitler's Table Talk and his public appearances and submits them, by repetition, mimicking or paraphrasing them, to an ironic revision that undermines their suggestive effect.

The voice as voice of dissent is simultaneously the author's voice. In considering a TV version of his film, Romm talks about the resulting changes several times. He does not see television simply as a means of distribution but as a different medium with aesthetic repercussions for the film. Its ability to put the author on the screen as a person beyond his merely vocal presence brings different ways of addressing the audience: :

The only thing I would ask of the television people in case my film should be broadcast: please put me in front of the screen in place of the introductory titles and texts. So I can talk to the viewer while he looks at me. [...] On television, you can look the viewer into the eyes (quoted in Beilenhoff and Hänsen 2009: 272).<sup>18</sup>

16. On the auratisation of image documents from the Holocaust see the pioneering study by Cornelia Brink (1998).

17. On this topic see Habbo Knoch (2001).

18. The conversation between director Romm and the critics Hermann Herlinghaus and Friedrich Hitzer from which this quote is taken can be found in Beilenhoff and Hänsen (2009: 268-274). Romm considered the film *Der lachende Mann – Bekenntnisse eines Mörders* / *The Laughing Man* (1966) by East German directors Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann, an interview with a western mercenary known as "Kongo-Müller", a kind of final chapter of *Obyknovennyi fashizm*.

## Transcription: From Film to Book

*Obyknovennyi fashizm* was seen by twenty million people in the Soviet Union in the eleven months after its release. The State publishing house for the arts ("Iskusstvo") asked Romm and his co-authors to prepare a book for the popular series "Masterpieces of Soviet Cinema" which, through the 1960s and 1970s, presented many classic Soviet films as photo-text books. Subjects included *Bronenosets Potemkin* / *Battleship Potemkin* (Eizenshtein, 1925), *Tri pesni o Lenine* / *Three Songs About Lenin* (Vertov, 1934), *Letiat zhuravli* / *The Cranes Are Flying* (Mikhail Kalatozov, 1957, USSR) and *Ballada o soldate* / *Ballad of a Soldier* (Grigorii Chukhrai, 1959, USSR).

Unlike the collective experience of a screening, the print version of a film allows the possibility of an individual reading, and this may have been the reason that the photo-text book of *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, just like the planned television broadcast, could not be realised. At the end of the 1960s, the book became a victim of Soviet censorship despite Romm's dedicated efforts to get it published.<sup>19</sup> This even included writing a letter to Leonid Brezhnev, Secretary-General of the CPSU at the time.<sup>20</sup>

There were certainly general political reasons for banning the book: at the end of the 1960s, following the liberalisation of the Thaw, there was a renewed restriction of critical viewpoints. But in all likelihood, media pragmatic considerations were also at the basis of the ban. A conversation with the censor that Romm related to his co-authors Khaniutin and Turovskaia is revealing in this context. Romm explained to the censor that millions of people had already seen the film and asked what sense there could possibly be in banning a book that only a few thousand readers would ever get hold of. The censor's answer was simple: "The film you see and forget. The book, on the other hand, you open and start to think" (Turovskaia 2006a: 264).



As simple as this answer is, it nevertheless precisely captures the far-reaching media implications associated with any print version of a film. The translation of a film into a book constitutes the materialisation of something immaterial: projected motion pictures become still images, oral speech becomes typographic writing. This results in a reading that alternates between still image and commentary text, and establishes correlations whose perception the unidirectional movement of the film's projection does not permit.<sup>21</sup>

We can suppose that Romm decided to select and arrange the individual stills himself to encourage such a process of reading. In the style of a filmstrip, the stills are assembled from top to bottom in the left column of the page. Certain shots are highlighted through magnification beyond the confines of the standard format. Equally from top to bottom, the text fragments of the commentary are placed next to the corresponding still frames in the right column. Added to that are a handwritten pagination and image count as well as technical notes. Furthermore, there are supplementary meta-comments of the authors on the individual film chapters.

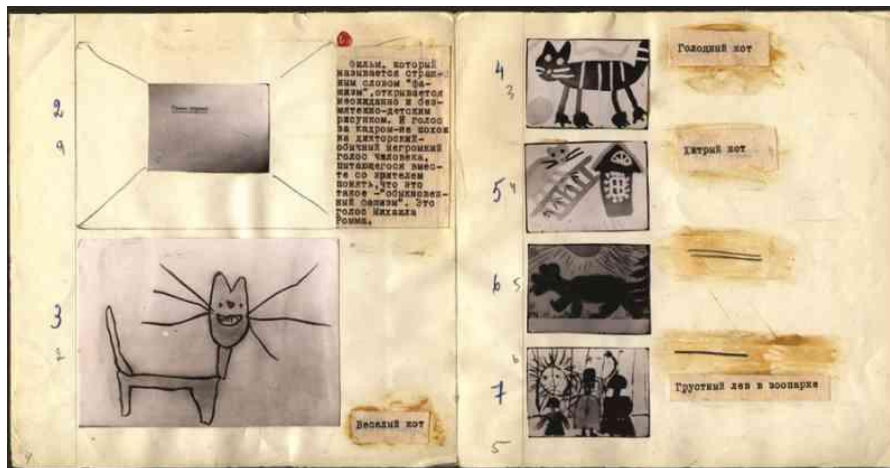


Fig. 4: A page from the typescript of Mikhail Romm's photo-text-book. Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow. Image courtesy of Russian State Archive of Literature and Art.

Compared to the fleeting perception of the film image and the ephemeral voice in the movie theatre, the printed form gives rise to a new experience of the film. The viewer becomes a reader going back and forth through the pages of the book, lets his gaze linger on certain images and is inspired to begin a process of reflection by some passages.

19. The photo-text book *Obyknovennyi fashizm* was finally released in Russian by the St. Petersburg-based publishing house Seans in 2006 after several unsuccessful attempts. For the discussion of the Russian publication see Elena Fanailova (2007). Beilenhoff and Hänsgen (2009) includes a number of hard-to-find publications, e.g. documenting the controversial reception of the film in the two German states (GDR and FRG) and further essays discussing historiographic and media theoretical aspects.

20. Romm's letter to Leonid Brezhnev discusses obstructions while working on the anti-fascist subject matter (Beilenhoff and Hänsgen 2009: 262-263).

21. On the relation between image and text in photo novels see Jean-Claude Chirollet (1983).

## Different Film Versions (GDR - FRG)

The complications of the exhibition history of *Obyknovennyi fashizm* gave birth to a number of different versions of the film. Remarkably, the film did not premiere in the Soviet Union but during the 8<sup>th</sup> International Documentary and Short Film Festival in Leipzig on November 13, 1965 that featured a retrospective with the motto "films contra fascism."<sup>22</sup>

On the initiative of the Academy of Arts of the GDR and the Club of Creative Artists, the film was shown to a select audience at the Filmkunst-Theater Kastanienallee (East Berlin) a few days later on November 17, 1965, once more in the presence of Romm. The official premiere of the German dubbed version, created by the DEFA, followed at the "International" cinema in East Berlin on March 25, 1966. On May 8, 1967, the film was broadcast on GDR state television but was suddenly withdrawn by order of the deputy secretary of culture only three days later on May 11th. The official justification read: "The intended effect of this film on the population of the GDR has been achieved. Therefore the film can be withdrawn from service" (quoted in Turovskaia 2008: 161).

In the decades that followed, the film could be screened only at closed events of social organisations and institutions until it was "[...] permitted for release in cinemas of the GDR" (ibid.: 163) with immediate effect on October 20, 1989. Thus *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, highly praised by the press and a multiple award winner at the most

important film festival of the GDR, soon became a “shelf film” while at the same time the culture department of the Soviet embassy in East Berlin made the film, which had been shown to great success in the USSR since March 1966, available without any constraints.

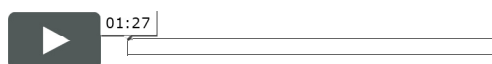
Complementing the Leipzig premiere, the film saw a second premiere at the opposite end of the political spectrum in FRG. On February 5 and 6, 1966, the Friends of the German Cinematheque had the opportunity of screening the film at the Academy of Arts in West Berlin – once again in Romm’s presence – in the version exhibited at the Leipzig festival. But it suddenly turned out that a sequence in which Romm had implied that Willy Brandt harboured revanchist intentions, had obviously been removed from the final, unfinished chapter. According to distributor Sergio Gambarov, “a minor operation” had taken place at the Soviet embassy (Erika and Ulrich Gregor 2009: 278).

In the Federal Republic of Germany, *Obyknovennyyi fashizm* was screened on the public television station ARD on August 1, 1968 for the first time. The film, internally categorised as a “controversial broadcast,” was given a perfect time-slot directly after the evening news and was aired in a version from which, as Jürgen Rühle, director of the East-West department of the West German Broadcasting Corporation (WDR), stated in a letter to the intendant “[...] a few sequences from the current final chapter” had been removed “with the explicit permission of Mikhail Romm himself.”<sup>23</sup> In particular, this concerned the depiction of neo-fascist activities in the Federal Republic, Great Britain and the USA. The film triggered a controversial reaction and even led to Klaus von Bismarck, intendant of the WDR at the time, being charged with “contributing to the incitement of the people.”<sup>24</sup> The conference of the chief editors of ARD (October 1 and 2, 1968) was concerned specifically with Romm’s film. The protocol reads: “Praise for the film *Obyknovennyyi fashizm* with a few critical remarks concerning certain false assessments and presentational tricks. Astonishment about the active participation which suggests that ‘coming to terms’ with the German past is still possible if formal efforts are made.”<sup>25</sup> That the film was broadcast both in the GDR and the FRG is even more remarkable in light of the fact that it could not be shown on television in its country of origin at the time. Meanwhile, the theatrical premiere in the FRG did not take place until two years later, in April 1970, on the initiative of distributor “Neue Filmkunst Walter Kirchner”. The Protestant Film Guild called it the “best film of the month” (May 1970). Several State Media Centres as well as union organisations made 16mm copies of the film available.

The different versions of *Obyknovennyyi fashizm* illustrate how much the handling of the film was influenced by the conflicts of the Cold War. The respective credits are particularly revealing in this context. As a paratext, the opening credits establish a transitional zone between cinematic and extra-cinematic reality. They not only contain information on the production of the film but also address the viewer at the same time (Alexander Böhnke and Rembert Hüser 2006). In the case of *Obyknovennyyi fashizm*, they can be seen as indicators of the different modes of reception in the respective political contexts.

In the opening credits of the original Soviet version, the emphasis is on referencing the sources and highlighting the documentary status of the material. While a title crawl with an exact listing of the consulted archives moves across the screen, Romm’s voice-over is heard:

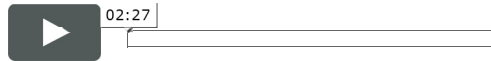
*Obyknovennyyi fashizm.* When we show you our film, we naturally do not assume that we will be able to exhaust all forms of such a phenomenon as fascism. That is impossible to do within the scope of a film. It is also impossible for the reason alone that many, furthermore decisive things have not left any filmic traces. They were not filmed. From the enormous amounts of material, we have chosen what seemed most impressive to us and gives us the opportunity to reflect together with you.



Video 7: Clip from: Mikhail Romm, *Obyknovennyyi fashizm*, 1965, opening sequence for USSR version. Clip courtesy of

Mosfil'm.

In contrast to the Soviet version, Romm himself appears on the screen in the DEFA version – a presentation he had originally envisaged for the unrealised Soviet television broadcast. Together with Martin Flörchinger, he sits at a table at the DEFA dubbing studios, talking directly to the camera in a very personal way, making it very clear that he intends to enter into a conversation with the viewer.



**Video 8:** Clip from: Mikhail Romm, *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, 1965, opening sequence for GDR version. Clip courtesy of Mosfil'm / DEFA.

In the West German version that was distributed on VHS by Atlas Film, *Obyknovennyi fashizm* was preceded by an extensive introduction. Apparently it was deemed necessary to give the film an explanatory framework since it confronted the West German audience with a plethora of Nazi imagery that, furthermore, had been assembled and commented on by a Soviet director. This task was given to the well-known publicist, sociologist and political scientist Eugen Kogon who enjoyed special authority in the debate on National Socialism in the young Federal Republic. Of Jewish descent Kogon had been an opponent of the Nazi party and a political prisoner at the Buchenwald concentration camp. He had published, as early as in 1946, his book *The SS-State*, which is considered the first systematic account of the Nazi crimes (Kogon: 1946). As a public intellectual he was furthermore supervisor and presenter of the political TV programme PANORAMA during the mid-1960s.

In contrast to the opening sequence of the DEFA version, which exhibits the immediacy of a personal conversation, the West German version presents Eugen Kogon in a more distanced manner as a kind of “television professor.”<sup>26</sup> He is shown sitting in an armchair in front of a table in a neutral, almost empty room. We do not see him speaking without notes but reading his introduction from a piece of paper instead, promoting Romm’s film with all his scientific and moral authority.



**Video 9:** Clip from: for Mikhail Romm, *Obyknovennyi fashizm*, 1965, opening sequence for FRG version. Clip courtesy of Mosfil'm / Atlas Film.

The West German television broadcast from August 1, 1968 also contains a prologue by Jürgen Rühle. Like the Atlas version, it is content with simply mentioning the film's source material without specifying its exact origin.

22. See Wolfgang Klaue and Manfred Lichtenstein (1965).

23. Document catalogued under HA WDR, 11257 (Letter by Jürgen Rühle to the Director General of the West German Broadcasting Corporation, Klaus von Bismarck, dated from October 25, 1968).

24. *Aktueller Fernsehdienst* No. 65, 08/09/68.

25. Document catalogued under HA WDR, 11257 (protocol of the conference of the television chief editors in Hamburg on October 1 and 2, 1968).

26. On his role as "television professor" see Eugen Kogon (1997: 168ff).

## Controversial Cold War Reception

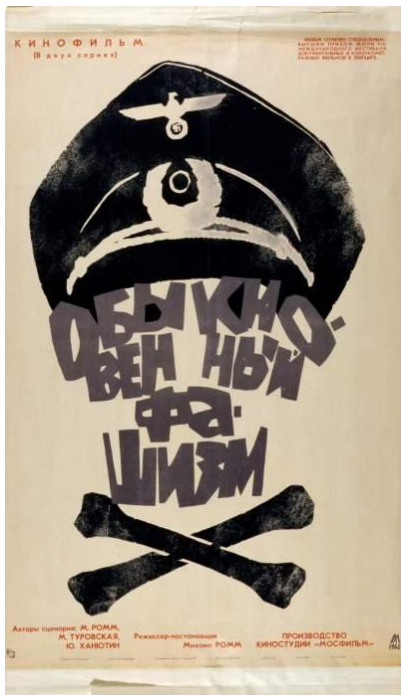


Fig. 5: Mikhail Khazanovskii, 1965, Soviet poster for *Obyknovenniy fashizm*. Lotman-Institut für russische und sowjetische Kultur, Ruhr-Universität Bochum. Image courtesy of Lotman-Institut für russische und sowjetische Kultur.

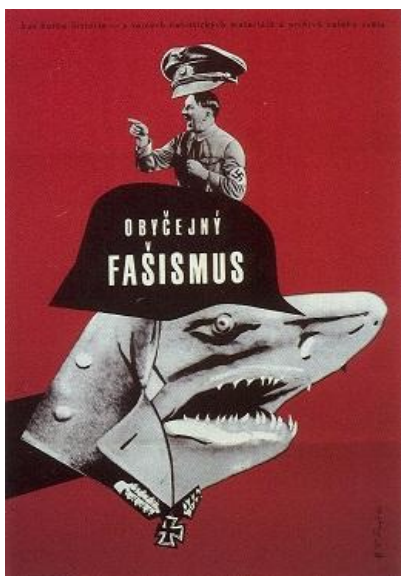


Fig. 6: František Forejt, 1966, Czechoslovakian poster for *Obyknovenniy fashizm*. Moravská galerie, Brno. Image courtesy of Moravská galerie.



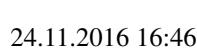
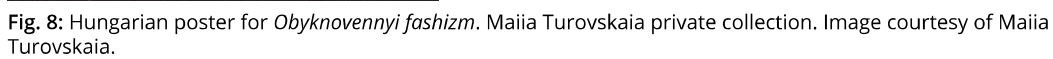
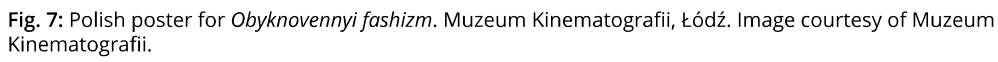


Fig. 9: Sovexportfilm poster for *Obyknovenniy fashizm*, 1968. EYE Film Institute Netherlands, Amsterdam. Image courtesy of EYE Film Institute Netherlands.

The East/West German reception history of *Obyknovenniy fashizm* begins like a fairy tale: “Once upon a time, highly official and very private Eastern and Western critique came together in Leipzig in deceptive, hopeful unison” (Färber 1966: 50). Reading the reviews, it becomes instantly clear that the “unison” brought about by Romm’s film subsequently takes the form of a negative mirror image, since *Obyknovenniy fashizm* becomes the ground on which East and West explore the delineation of their respective positions. From the very beginning, the reception of this film in both German states stands in the context of coming to terms with their own history: it acts as a lens focusing the discursive self-constitution of the GDR and FRG. Therefore, the different readings in the reviews at hand also offer conflicting answers to shared questions.

At the centre is the topos of “learning from history”. Romm’s film appears as a potential medium of education. This explains its possibly somewhat surprising classification by the respective censors: In the GDR, the film was approved for everyone aged 14 years and over, and in the FRG, with reference to the “importance of creating historical awareness”, for ages 12 and over since “Professor Kogon’s introductory lecture, encouraging serious consideration [...] immediately establishes the proper basis for the film experience and steers the adolescent’s faculty for observation into the right direction.”<sup>27</sup>

Feedback in the GDR included a review titled “Fascism and born in 52” by the 14 year-old Regine from Rostock: “Even though my parents tried to answer my questions, I could never really imagine all that. [...] Now that I have seen this Soviet documentary, some things have become a lot clearer to me” (*Norddeutsche Neueste Nachrichten*, Rostock, April 22, 1966). High school student Stefan Pampel writes: “The film was a great experience, helping me better understand the history of our people” (*Freie Presse*, Karl-Marx-Stadt, April 9, 1966). The topos of learning from history can similarly also be found in West German reception. The Protestant Film Guild recommends – the different emphasis is obvious – discussing the following topics after the presentation: “Man’s susceptibility to seduction and his responsibility” and “Finally draw a line! the temptation of harmful oblivion”. With screenings in schools and other educational institutions in mind, Ulrich Kurowski outlines “aspects for discussion” based on the assumption that the power to fascinate emanating from fascist film documents is not only rooted in their topic but in their form as well (Kurowski 2009: 290).

The impact these film documents still possess even decades later is demonstrated by the reactions of the television audience. Following the broadcast, Nina Grunenberg compiled the following collage from the unusually large number of letters sent to the WDR:

After the first scenes of the film, Mr. G. R., former infantryman of the “Waffen-SS” and prisoner of war (four and a half years in the Urals), got his son back out of bed, spent two hours glued to the television screen with him and was delighted at the fourteen-year-old’s comment: “Better than *Bonanza*.” The veterinarian W. H., on the other hand, hammered a proclamation “against the diabolical, satanic, godless Marxism-Leninism” into his typewriter “in the name of all free and enslaved peoples of the East” and denounced “the Marxist hangmen-murderers and exploiting bloodsuckers.” Mr. J. K. demanded an apology to the German people. The teacher D. L. bitterly recapitulated the situation of her flight from Silesia through the GDR into the west and her husband’s “heroic death” in Russia. Ms. L. B. found it unacceptable. Mr. G. S. found it “simply great.” In his mind’s eye, Mr. H. T. saw the Bolsheviks rub their hands about Germany’s “useful idiots.” Mr. E. K., member of the Christian Democratic Union, is no longer surprised by the large crowds drawn by the National Democratic Party. Mr. H. Z., member of the state parliament of Bavaria, asked for a rerun “due to the great popularity among the people.” Mr. H. R. no longer wants to put up with programmes “from the Jewish-communist devil’s workshop” (Grunenberg 1968).

While these letters are very direct expressions of audience approval and rejection, a one-day-survey conducted by opinion research institute Infratest on Thursday, August 1st, 1968 condenses the polarised reactions to the film: “The audience reaction at hand is animated, often dedicated and split into pro and contra. Only very few restrict themselves to a solely ‘quite interesting’ or ‘less interesting’ surface impression. [...] Apparently, the educational background of the respective viewers was of critical importance for the reception of this Russian film.” A clear majority assessed it positively, based on criteria like “Was historically enlightening. [...] A lot of new footage that has never been seen before. [...] It was true and allowed for comparisons between the past and the present. [...] A shocking document. [...] Even though it was a Russian film, it was believable and corresponded to the facts. [...]” More than a third of viewers reacted negatively with reactions broken down according to the following criteria: “Realistic but the topic is worn out. Who still wants to see that today? [...] It is time to stop with these incendiary programmes. They are subjects of great argument in the family. [...] Propaganda from start to finish.”<sup>28</sup>

However, the reactions to Romm’s film are not simply within the scope of “vox populi”. *Obyknovenniy fashizm* actually becomes a screen on which are projected discourses that play a central role in the identity construction of the GDR and the FRG respectively. The reception in the GDR is dominated by the anti-fascist discourse that traces fascism to capitalist economic interests and points to (neo-)fascist tendencies in Western societies. In keeping with this principle, Friedrich Kind, a member of the State Council of the GDR, emphasised in his official address at the premiere of the film “[...] that the horrible fascist past increasingly comes back to life in West Germany” (*Lausitzer*

*Rundschau*, March 30, 1966). That we are dealing with an exemplary Cold War quarrel is demonstrated by the fact that, complementary to this accusation of fascism, the West German critique claims a structural similarity of the political systems of fascism and totalitarianism.<sup>29</sup> In the course of this, the comparison between fascism and Stalinism is repeatedly made explicit, whereas it remains only implicit in the film itself: "What similarities there are between the mass-psychological habitus of the National Socialist and the Soviet systems, at least under Stalin, as well as the Chinese and East German ones in the present!" (Hans-Georg Soldat, *Der Tagesspiegel*, February 9, 1966)

These reciprocal projections and transfers of the shared fascist past onto the opposing social system, can be observed in the reviews, but also results from the ambivalent structure of the film itself. Examining its line of reasoning as a whole, the rhetorical patterns of the Cold War become apparent: The world is divided into absolute good and evil, into the world of socialist humanism and a capitalist world characterised by neo-fascism and militarism. At the same time, however, this dichotomising distinction is repeatedly undermined by an arrangement of the image material that establishes a similarity in the dissimilar. In the fascist imagery with its negative connotations, experiences from one's own political culture are mirrored over and over again.

However, in the context of official Soviet ideology Romm decided, in a kind of self-censorship, not to mention Jews explicitly as victims of the Nazi regime. As Erika Gregor reports from the screening of *Obyknovenniy fashizm* at the "Friends of the Deutsche Kinemathek" in 1966 in West-Berlin:

There was a lively discussion, the vast majority supported the film, everyone was deeply shocked and moved, and then it happened: A good friend of ours, the religious scholar Jochanan Bloch, suddenly said that he considered *Obyknovenniy fashizm* a harrowing film that moved him greatly and that it was a very important film that should be shown everywhere. One thing struck him however: the word "Jew" was not uttered even once in the whole movie. And the people it showed - victims, the tortured, the dead - were called "Soviet citizens", though they had not been tortured as Soviet citizens, but as Jews.<sup>30</sup> In a private conversation after the public discussion, Romm explained: "That was the condition under which I was able to make this film ... that the word 'Jew' was not mentioned in this film."<sup>31</sup>

27. Classification decree of the Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft (FSK, Voluntary Self Regulation of the Film Industry), assessment meeting on June 12, 1970.

28. Document catalogued under DRA (Deutsches Rundfunkarchiv), A 53 (Infratest, One-Day-Survey, August 1, 1968).

29. On the significance of discourses of anti-fascism and totalitarianism see Wolfgang Wippermann (1997).

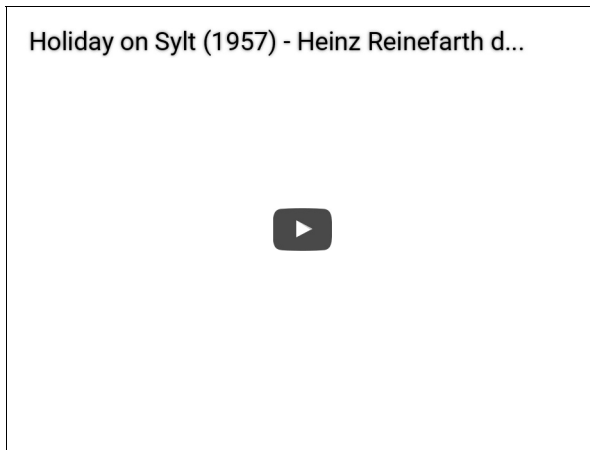
30. See Jeremy Hicks (2012). For the period from early Russian cinema to Perestroika see further Valérie Pozner and Natacha Laurent (2012). New studies on the topic in German language include Lilia Antipow, Jörn Petrick, and Matthias Dornhuber (2011), and in particular contributions by Helmut Altrichter and Lilia Antipow (2011) and Johannes Kuck (2011).

31. "Es gab eine lebendige Diskussion, die überwiegende Mehrheit war für diesen Film, alle waren tief erschüttert und bewegt, und dann passierte es: Ein guter Freund von uns, der Religionswissenschaftler Jochanan Bloch, meldete sich plötzlich zu Wort und sagte, dass er den *Gewöhnlichen Faschismus* für einen erschütternden Film hielt, der ihn sehr bewege, und dass dies ein sehr gewichtiger Film sei, der überall gezeigt werden solle – eines sei ihm aber aufgefallen, im ganzen Film fiele nicht einmal das Wort 'Jude'. Und die Menschen, die er zeigte – als Opfer, als Gefolterte, als Tote – würden 'Sowjetbürger' genannt, doch sie seien nicht als Sowjetbürger gemartert worden, sondern als Juden.' In einem privaten Gespräch nach der öffentlichen Diskussion erklärte Romm: 'Das war die Bedingung, unter der ich diesen Film machen durfte... Dass das Wort 'Jude' in diesem Film nicht fällt' (Erika und Ulrich Gregor 2009: 278).

## Obyknovenniy fashizm and the History of Compilation Film

The controversial reception of *Obyknovenniy fashizm* – a reception defined as much by emotions as by arguments – can, among other things, be explained by the fact that Romm continued the tradition of compilation films about National Socialism and the Shoah but at the same time also developed discursive and aesthetic devices that were unfamiliar to the audience. The place Romm's film has in this tradition will be outlined in the final remarks.

Worth mentioning in this context are the DEFA films by Andrew and Annelie Thorndike which represent the first cinematic reflection on fascism and its continued existence from the GDR's point of view. *Du und mancher Kamerad / You and Some Comrade* (1956), for example, unfolds a concept of history that – corresponding to the dogma of anti-fascism – portrays the Federal Republic as the heir to Nazi fascism.<sup>32</sup> The relevance assigned to such compilation films in the GDR is demonstrated by the fact that a special series titled "Archives 0Bear Witness" (orig.: "Archive sagen aus") was launched in 1957. The first film of this series, *Urlaub auf Sylt / Holiday on Sylt* (Thorndike and Thorndike, 1957), exposed the mayor of Westerland, Hans Reinefahrt, as SS-Reichsprotektor and the "butcher of Warsaw".



**Video 10:** Clip from: Andrew Thorndike and Annelie Thorndike, *Urlaub Auf Sylt*, 1957. Clip courtesy of DEFA / Plato Films.

*Unternehmen Teutonenschwert / Operation Teutonic Sword* (Thorndike and Thorndike, 1958), a film about Hans Speidel, a former general of the German Wehrmacht who was supreme commander of the NATO ground forces at the end of the 1950s, employed a similar strategy of revelation to imply continuity between National Socialism and the society of the Federal Republic.

Polish films played an important part in the search for new formal devices in the compilation film genre. Jörg Frieß analyses how these films developed an audiovisual rhetoric which overrides the visual power of Nazi propaganda material (2009: 300-309). Quite early on, Polish compilations aimed reflect on the status of documentary images as a medium. *Powszedni Dzień Gestapowca Schmidta / The Everyday Life Of The Gestapo Man Schmidt* (1964) by Jerzy Ziarnik not only inspired Romm to employ photographs in the cinematic medium but also anticipated his expansion of the source material to those private image documents that deal with the ordinary fascism of Romm's title.

Ziarniks' film leafs through the photo album of a high-ranking Gestapo officer which was kept in the Warsaw archives of the "Main Commission for investigating the Crimes against the Polish Nation". The interest in the mental and psychological disposition of a perpetrator marks a shift of perspective in the tradition of the compilation film. The film visualizes the everyday life of a Gestapo man as he himself wanted it to be remembered. However, at the end of the film, the commentary asks viewers to memorise the perpetrator's face to help to identify him and take him to court.



**Video 11:** Clip from: Jerzy Ziarnik, *Powszedni Dzień Gestapowca Schmidta*, 1964. Clip courtesy of WFDiF.

A crucial influence was Leiser's *Den blodiga tiden*, although Romm polemically distanced himself from the film from a methodological perspective. To some extent, both directors worked with the same material but treated it in different ways. Leiser chose a historiographic approach, assembling the material into a chronologically linear story – told by an authorial voice-over commentary – with Hitler at its centre. Romm conducted an experiment regarding this film's relationship between image and commentary with his collaborators. He showed them *Mein Kampf*, but without sound. As Maiia Turovskaia remembers, the images suddenly lost all coherence:

After the first part the sound was turned off and after a few minutes we were in the midst of the chaos of the shots: the editing was built according to the text, the plot was, by and large, historical. It became clear that such a solution didn't work for us - we were interested not so much in the history of the phenomenon but in the phenomenon as such (Turovskaia 2006b: 275).

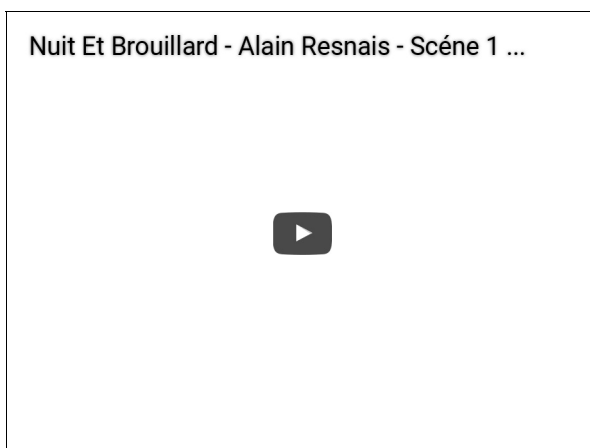




**Video 12:** Clip from: Erwin Leiser, *Den blodiga tiden*, 1960. Clip courtesy of Minerva Film AB.

Romm's intention was not only to demonstrate the purely illustrative role of the images in Leiser's film, but (successfully, as it turned out) to justify his own intention of assembling the images as an autonomous visual factor in *Obyknovennyi fashizm*.

Romm and his collaborators were also familiar with Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard* (1955), which is devoted entirely to the complex of the concentration camps. The film begins with a camera movement across the deserted, overgrown compound of a concentration camp which repeatedly freezes in place. This contemporary colour footage is contrasted with the shocking black-and-white images recorded by Allied forces in the liberated concentration camps. The voice-over commentary of Jean Cayrol, a writer who had himself been a camp prisoner, enables the viewer to comprehend the search for a language that might be able to make the past events imaginable.<sup>33</sup>



**Video 13:** Clip from: Alain Resnais, *Nuit et brouillard*, 1955. Clip courtesy of Argos Films.

Resnais questions the possibility of visually memorising the Shoah – and for Romm, there is no immediate access to history either. This is why he focuses on the political function of images in fascism, on their historical signature. To analyse them, he employs a double strategy: on one hand, he operates with critical devices like the “montage of attractions”, freeze-frames, repetition of the same shots or the magnification of their framing. On the other, he adds a new dimension to the voice-over commentary. In contrast to Leiser, Romm's commentary does not tell the story of the rise and fall of the Third Reich but rather unfolds a rhetoric that alternates between pathos and irony, description and narration, self-questioning and viewer address. Furthermore, the voice speaking the commentary is the voice of the author himself. This personal involvement also manifests itself in Romm's visits to former concentration camps. In the corridors of Auschwitz's barracks he encountered the gaze of the prisoners in the photographs on display there – an existential experience that Romm recreated cinematically by repeatedly zooming in on individual faces.

While Romm had refused to include any feature film footage, a younger generation considered this an unrealised possibility in cinematic reflections on fascism. Khaniutin's and Turovskaja's original suggestion thus found an unexpected realisation. The exploration of the totalitarian past now became an exploration of the mythologies of German and Soviet mass culture.

On May 9, 1994 – the anniversary of the end of the war – Vladimir Sorokin's, Tat'iana Didenko's and Aleksandr Shamaïskii's cinematic collage *Bezumnyi Fric / Mad Fritz* was broadcast on Russian television. Contrary to

compilation with its reference to historical reality, this collage of Soviet feature films aimed at a deconstruction of traditional modes of representation. It exposed “fascinating fascism” (Susan Sontag 1980: 73-105) by uncovering its traces in the audience’s own visual culture and confronting them with its latent disposition for this kind of aesthetic through a hypertrophising accumulation of corresponding motifs.

A comparable cinematic reflection on fascism can also be found in *Hitlers Hitparade* (2003) by Oliver Axer and Susanne Benze. Like *Bezumniy Fric*, this collage of Nazi educational, animated, advertising, propaganda, and feature films as well as contemporary home movies dispenses with an author’s commentary. The author no longer appears as a narrating, explaining voice but as a kind of interface between the appropriated images, accompanied by Third Reich dance and popular music, alternately intensifying, and contrasting with the images. In the following film clip dance movements from a musical comedy film are intercut and synchronized with colour documentary footage of military parades and mass ornaments from animated films. The leitmotif of this sequence is taken from the German film *Die Frau meiner Träume / The Woman of My Dreams* by Georg Jacoby starring Marika Röck which was hugely popular in the postwar Soviet Union. Interestingly, the German documentary images cited in *Obyknovennyyi fashizm* as well as popular feature films were part of the film corpus which was confiscated by the Red Army from the Reich Film Archives (Reichsfilmarchiv).



**Video 14:** Clip from: Oliver Axer and Susanne Benze, *Hitlers Hitparade*, 2003. Clip courtesy of Arte / C. Cay Wesnigk Film.

In a different aesthetic context and drawing on new sources, *Hitlers Hitparade* took up Romm’s aspiration of exploring and understanding everyday life in fascism, which he was unable to realise completely due to a lack of sources. *Hitlers Hitparade* is a reflection on the constitutive function of mass media for everyday life in modern societies, and shows to what degree everyday life in Germany at that time was determined by a specific mixture of mass media, combining ideology with entertainment and consumption. .

32. On the DEFA films see Thomas Heimann (1996) as well as Matthias Steinle (2003)

33. The complexity of Resnais’s film, which is demonstrated by the way its structure, production process and reception history are interwoven, has been systematically analysed by Sylvie Lindeperg (2007).

## The Question of Evidence

Compilation films about Hitler and the Third Reich have been very popular in the last decades, especially on television. The majority of these compilations work with a very limited pool of images, continually recycled and presented in new variations and contexts to function as abstract symbols or allegories (Peter Zimmermann 2005; Judith Keilbach 2008).

Against this recycling, a number of critical interventions point out the "double" status of these images, which simultaneously visualise fascism as documents and are intended to serve as critical instruments, for example Hartmut Bitomsky’s comments from his film *Deutschlandbilder*:

There was never a moment of iconoclasm in Germany, a first act of outrage in which the films would have been destroyed. . These films were confiscated, and that is something different. Though they were locked away, there was still a plan for them. Like prisoners who can be ransomed, they are occasionally revealed. It has to be ensured that context and precise dosage render them innocuous. These are the limits of their use as documents, and as documents they are entrusted with a twofold function: to prove what fascism was really like, and to say what fascism said at that time. The same old message once again. But this time as a terrible message. [...] And simultaneously, they are supposed to testify against themselves, like agents who defected and were turned. And they speak, and we understand them. We are not confronted with the incomprehensible babbling

of a strange language. And then there is the fact of their availability: Not only do these films survive transformation into chief witnesses – they almost lend themselves to it. As if this were exactly their purpose: to serve as documentary evidence.<sup>34</sup>

Romm had already realised this request for a critical reflection on the process of using documents as mere evidence in the 1960s, through montage, text inserts and voice and thereby established a tradition of subjective intervention in the compilation film genre. The voice of the author highlights its perspective as that of a contemporary commentator and thus creates a connection between history and the viewer's present.

Translated by Sebastian Moretto

34. Voice-over commentary from the film *Deutschlandbilder* (Bitomsky; Mühlenbrock 2007: 296).

## Dedication

To Maiia Turovskaia with gratitude.

Russian culturologist Maiia Turovskaia, author of books about Bertolt Brecht and Andrei Tarkovskii, co-author of the film *Ordinary Fascism*, was filmed by Artem Demenok recounting her life as a biographical novel, complemented with photographs and newsreel footage, and accompanied by a minimalist soundtrack by Alva Noto and Ryuichi Sakamoto. *Maiia Turovskaia. Oskol'ki / Maiia Turovskaia. Fragments* (2014, Russia). Maiia Turovskaia turned 90 on October 27, 2014.

[http://tvkultura.ru/video/show/brand\\_id/59638/episode\\_id/1220334/video\\_id/1213091/](http://tvkultura.ru/video/show/brand_id/59638/episode_id/1220334/video_id/1213091/)

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Sabine Hänsen is a Slavic and media scholar, a conceptual artist, curator, and translator. She studied Slavic literatures, history, and art history at the Ruhr University Bochum, and was awarded a DAAD research grant at the Institute of Cinematography VGIK in Moscow with a doctoral thesis on Soviet film history. She has conducted research and taught at universities in Bochum, Bielefeld, Bremen, Cologne, Basel, and Berlin, and has also been involved in establishing an audiovisual archive of Moscow conceptualism. Currently she is a researcher in the project *Performance Art in Eastern Europe* at the University of Zurich. Her books (also under the pseudonym Sascha Wonders) include: *Kulturpalast. Neue Moskauer Poesie und Aktionskunst* (with Günter Hirt, 1984), *Moskau. Moskau. Videostücke* (1987), *Präprintium. Moskauer Bücher aus dem Samizdat* (1998), *Sovetskaja vlast' i media* (co-edited with Hans Günther, 2006), and *Der gewöhnliche Faschismus. Ein Werkbuch zum Film von Michail Romm* (co-edited with Wolfgang Beilenhoff, 2009).

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